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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001061

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, S/CT
NSC FOR E. MILLARD
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#) [JA](#) [NO](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: GSL tries to calm situation after sinking of Tiger ship; Key minister expresses concerns re navy

Refs: (A) Ops Center-Colombo 06/16/03 telecon

- (B) Colombo 1053, and previous

(U) Classified by Joseph L. Novak, Charge d'Affaires.
Reasons: 1.5 (b, d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: In the aftermath of the June 14 sinking of a Tiger ship, the GSL is trying to calm the situation, assuring the Tigers that it is looking into ways to devolve power to the north/east. Minister Moragoda, a key adviser to the PM, has expressed deep concerns to us about the navy's handling of the incident. The Tigers remain very, very sore over the sinking of their ship. Despite the GSL's best efforts, a bit of tension remains in the air. END SUMMARY.

GSL Reaches Out

2. (SBU) In the aftermath of the sinking of a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ship on June 14, the GSL is trying to calm the situation. (Note: Per Ref B, the ship sank off the northeast coast during a confrontation with the Sri Lankan Navy, "SLN," and all 12 of its crew are believed dead. It remains unclear whether the crew of the ship detonated it or whether it was sunk by SLN gunfire. The SLN insists that the Tigers destroyed the ship.) In response to a question at a June 16 press conference, G.L. Peiris, a minister and the GSL's key peace process negotiator, said the June 14 incident did not increase the risk of war because the LTTE had promised it would not go down that route again. Peiris added that the Norwegian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) was looking into the incident and would report on ways to avoid similar incidents in the future.

3. (SBU) Regarding the peace process in general, Peiris related that the government was putting together new proposals in an effort to break the ongoing stalemate. (Note: The LTTE pulled out of the peace talks in late April and refused to attend the recent Tokyo donors conference. The LTTE is demanding the immediate formation of an interim structure in the north/east, which it would basically control.) Peiris said the government was thinking of recommending the formation of "district development committees" in the handful of districts comprising the north/east. These committees -- perhaps acting in conjunction with "special commissioners" -- would be empowered to distribute assistance, including some of that garnered from the international community at the recent Tokyo conference. Peiris remarked that these proposals would take some more time to formulate. The GSL hoped, however, to meet face-to-face with the LTTE soon to discuss them -- "It is necessary that the parties talk to each other to carry the process forward," he said. He stressed that the proposals, if agreed to, would be only "temporary measures" subject to further GSL-LTTE discussions re forming some sort of interim arrangement in the north/east.

4. (SBU) (((Note: At the press conference, Peiris was also asked about the recent assassination in Jaffna of an anti-LTTE Tamil politician. Peiris said the police were investigating the incident and it would be handled as a criminal matter. Per Ref B, the Jaffna slaying was perhaps the most brazen of about 30 similar killings which have taken place this year. The killings are almost certainly being perpetrated by the LTTE. End Note.)))

Key Minister's Concerns re Navy

5. (C) In his comments on the ship incident, Milinda Moragoda, another key minister working on peace process issues, told the Ambassador late June 16 that he had

deep concerns about the navy's handling of the matter. Moragoda said as far as he understood the SLN had failed to keep the SLMM fully informed of its actions. Moreover, the SLN had not placed a monitor on board its ships before commencing the operation, which should have been standard procedure during the cease-fire.

16. (C) In parenthetical remarks, Moragoda said he also had serious worries about command-and-control issues related to the navy. The government, for example, was not informed of the SLN's actions on June 14. There was some indication, Moragoda continued, that the SLN had briefed President Kumaratunga, but Prime Minister Wickremesinghe was not kept in the loop. (Note: Kumaratunga and Wickremesinghe share a tense cohabitation relationship.) Admiral Sandagiri, the commander of the navy who was in Hawaii for meetings at CINCPAC, had also apparently been informed of what was transpiring. Moragoda noted that the SLN had also not been fully in touch with the government re its activities during a previous incident in March in which a LTTE boat was sunk in similar circumstances. Moragoda was not clear whether the GSL planned to take action against the navy in this instance, but he indicated that the government was looking into the matter.

Tigers Remain Angry

17. (C) As for the LTTE, the group has had no further comments re the sinking of its ship since its June 15 letter to the SLMM. (Note: In the letter, the LTTE complained in harsh tones about the SLN's actions in intercepting the LTTE's ship, which the group said was only an "oil tanker" -- See Ref B.) In a June 17 conversation, however, Joseph Pararajahsingham, a MP for the Tamil National Alliance with very close LTTE links, told us that the group remained "extremely angry with the navy over the sinking of the ship." Pararajahsingham said the LTTE felt that the sinking was "totally uncalled for" and a clear violation of the February 2002 ceasefire agreement. When asked, Pararajahsingham was not clear what the LTTE might do in response, but he said the group was still committed to the peace process. Queried about Peiris' comments, he replied that the idea for "district development committees" was an old one and he doubted the Tigers had any interest in discussing the matter.

18. (C) ((Note: In his comments to the Ambassador, Moragoda noted that the Norwegian government facilitators were having no luck enticing the Tigers back to the peace talks. Moragoda said Anton Balasingham, the LTTE's London-based chief negotiator, remained virtually incommunicado. In the meantime, Mission has been told by Japanese embassy sources that the GoJ has also been unable to arrange meetings with the LTTE in order to brief the group on what happened at the Tokyo conference. End Note.)))

COMMENT

19. (C) In his June 16 comments, Peiris was clearly trying to calm things down. Based on what we are hearing, however, his remarks did not mollify the Tigers, who remain very, very disturbed over the attack on their ship and the apparent loss of their personnel. It is still unclear whether the group plans to take some sort of action to make its displeasure felt beyond its complaint to the monitors about the navy. Until the Tigers' precise course of action is clear, however, some tension will remain in the air.

110. (C) As for Moragoda's comments, the apparent failure of the navy to bring the matter to the attention of the government represents a real breach in civilian control of the armed forces. One would think the prime minister would have to react to such a snub, but his situation is a tricky one and a dressing down of the navy is quite possibly something he might choose to avoid. END COMMENT.

111. (U) Minimize considered.

NOVAK